

Damien Rice *My Favourite Faded Fantasy*



Photograph by Lilja Birgisdóttir

They say timing is everything. So it follows that sometimes it's just as important to know when not to make a record as it is to know when to make one. Damien Rice knows something about that. Not least of all because if he had allowed himself the luxury of choice, he might have delayed the release of *9*, his 2006 follow-up to *O*, his understated yet emotionally charged debut that elevated the ordinary frustrations of love, life and the future with gentle but eloquent profundity.

But then he wasn't sure how much time he needed. A year? Two? Just long enough that he could write more songs that felt right. Who can say now? When he looks back he remembers that *O* was recorded with patience and *9* with frustration.

It felt imperative that before he could release another album, he needed to figure out a few things. Like why when he had everything a man could want, he still felt something was missing.

"I'd reached what was called a high, playing the biggest venues I'd ever played. The money was rolling in, and everything was quote-unquote perfect, great. And everything sort of crumbled and fell apart at that moment. I became really unhappy, and so that went spiraling down, down, down, where I got to this place where I had everything I thought I wanted and I still wasn't happy. That felt very, I guess, disheartening. So I kind of crashed.

"If you've got a dream to chase or a target to aim for, it's easier. You tell yourself, 'When I achieve this, when I do that, then I'll feel more contented. I'll feel happier', but it's a myth. Chasing dreams can be a great motivation for getting up out of bed in the morning, but if you're looking for an achievement to give you lasting happiness, you may end up disappointed. Of course, there's a moment of elation when any 'dream comes true', as they say, but that's followed by a quietness and you're again left with yourself and if you're not good with yourself then you're not good with anything. Then it's so easy to think 'I need more, that's all, I just need more, if I had more, then I'd be happy', but it's not true. Happiness is more of a decision than a consequence. However, at the time, I had no idea of this. To me, I was the guy who was supposed to be happy because in society's eyes I had money, success, whatever. But I still felt an emptiness, a void, and that threw me into a spin."

A spin he had to reverse. The old saying goes, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" For Damien Rice, before he could make any more music, he needed to locate that soul again.

He needed to stop thinking that he had squandered his youth, and that he'd lost his connection to the people who meant the most to him. The ones he played with in those early years, making *O*, touring nonstop for years. Recording *9*, and then touring again. To have that close connection, and then to have the whole thing fall away. It just didn't make sense to him.

He became confused. And who wouldn't be? After achieving so much – the Shortlist Prize, multiplatinum record sales – gaining legions of fans and supposedly having everything, he felt as if he had nothing at all. He'd lost

his love for music and lost connection with those with whom he had played. And he blamed himself for that. He blamed himself for everything, really.

Lou Reed was fond of saying that a breakdown often precedes a breakthrough, implying that you had to hit the bottom before any real forward progress can be made.

Change is hard, but the pain of not changing is worse. And Rice intuitively knew that. But also he seemed to understand that life is often contradictory and paradoxical, and the seeds of one's own success are often sown in failure. The solution is often contained in the problem.

"Do you know what nettles are?" asks Rice. "Stinging nettles. They're very common in Ireland, and for somebody who's never come across them before and they walk through a field, they're in for a real shock. And the stings that come up are painful and irritating. I used to do a lot of fishing when I was younger, and so I'd walk through a lot of fields to get to the river to fish, and it was where a lot of nettles grew. My dad taught me, if I ever got stung, the first thing I would do was to look around. Because wherever the nettles are growing you'll find the dock leaves growing. You pull off the dock leaf, you rub it onto the nettle sting, and the sting goes away. It's a little paradoxical that the remedy is often found by revisiting the pain. I love that. Songwriting is similar. And it's hard sometimes to tell the difference between pain and joy. Like if somebody's really laughing hard, they sometimes look like they're crying. It's so close. The tears in their eyes, their body in convulsions."

Paradoxes seem to fascinate Rice, like the tension between self-love and self-abnegation. So it followed that the cure for what ailed him — his fear that the music had gone out of him — was to not focus on the music. To actually de-emphasize it. Not make any for a while. But instead, to revisit those areas in life that hurt.

He had always had a wanderlust, so he packed up all of his belongings, stuffed what he needed into just two suitcases and started traveling, touching down in various places, never staying in one place too long. That was until he got to Iceland. "Iceland definitely was a place that inspired this record. I've fallen in love with it, for sure," he explains.

"What I've become most excited about in the last bunch of years, is learning. Learning that I know nothing. And of course, I don't even know that, but it's a thrilling place to hang out. It's almost like music has taken second place to it now, and because I'm not giving music such an importance in my life I notice that music is flowing more. It's an interesting thing again, the paradox. The less I demand of it, the more it gives me.

"One day it occurred to me that I hadn't been worrying about making a record anymore. I noticed that all these years had just flown by. I sat for a minute and I imagined myself on my deathbed, and thinking okay, I have an hour to live and one more hour on the planet. In that moment, what do I want? And I noticed that I didn't care about whether I had sold more records, or less records. What was most important to me in that moment was wanting to shed whatever mask I'd been wearing so that I could at least be myself in the world, before I die, instead of some version of myself that I thought was appropriate.

"When I started to notice that I wasn't being honest with myself and with other people, it really affected me. I said to myself: You could be gone at any moment and you wouldn't have lived being yourself. Who are you? Who's under that skin, who's behind that thought, who's in there? As soon as I became curious about what was really going on inside, the music just started flowing."

Although when the songs came, they were constructed differently. They used to be much more outwardly focused; sometimes they were confessional, or his way of getting the last word, those things you wished you'd said at the heat of the moment. But the songs he was writing now were something else entirely. Like all the characters in a dream, all the songs seemed to be about some aspects of himself.

"I had this habit of writing songs that were reactions to certain situations. I started to look at the words that I was singing and noticed that they weren't necessarily true. I started looking at how I was expressing myself, and where the thoughts or the stories were coming from. Where before I may have written from a place of retribution, now I couldn't see whom to blame. Instead, I saw hundreds of scenarios that led to a certain

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consequence, and each scenario had a hundred other things that led to that and so it was impossible to point my finger anywhere because everything was continuously always changing and fluid. This fluidity led to laughter when I found that everything I thought was bad was good. It was the great cosmic comic, cracking jokes."

What also helped was working with producer Rick Rubin.

"I have to really give a lot of thanks to Rick Rubin. He got my engine started again."

The two began work in Los Angeles in January 2013, which put almost all of Damien's doubts to rest whether or not he was ready to record again.

"The reason why it took me so long to record this record was because I kept on starting it and quitting it and starting it and quitting it, so I got nowhere. Everything I'd do I would criticize. But when I sat with Rick, he would simplify everything, which would still the mind."

"For example, he would say, 'Let's just work on this song here.' I would say to him, 'But I just don't like the middle eight section.' Then he would calmly say, 'What don't you like about the middle eight?' Then I would tell him. Then he'd ask, 'Do you like the melody?' I like the melody, it's just these lyrics are just annoying me. He'd say, 'Okay, so which don't you like? Do you like these ones here?' 'Yeah, I like those ones there, but this line here I hate.' So he'd say to me, 'so let's get really clear. Basically, you like this whole song, except for these five words?' I'd have to say yes.

So he would give me homework. He's say, 'Between now and tomorrow, do nothing else except sit with these five words.' He wouldn't tell me to change them. Just sit with them. After he'd leave the studio I'd laugh and think he'd given me a challenge that sounds like it's for a baby. Like, can you pick up those bricks and put them over there? But so slowly, step-by-step, I started finishing songs, and I stopped criticizing myself so much for being useless for not being able to finish anything. Rick has this intense ability to accept you just as you are, which inevitably inspires you to change. He holds the mirror, he doesn't judge what's in it."

The album was the result of honest hard work and dedication.

"After I sorted things out for myself, I felt myself falling more into that space of 'how hard can I work for this?' Even if I'm at that moment where I don't feel like doing this thing one minute more, I'd say to myself, 'Can I manage to get over the hump and just do it?' I could. I did. I was constantly challenging myself. I learned a lot about hump jumping with Rick."

"I'd gotten to this place where I realized that there is nobody who supports me more than myself and there's nobody who takes me down more than myself. And there's nobody who knows me better than myself and there's nobody who's capable of loving me or hating me more than myself. There was a sense of real liberation in that. You say that to people and they would go, 'God, you're so fulla yourself.' Growing up in Ireland where it's often considered normal to put ourselves down, take out the whip and if the English won't whip us any more, we'll feckin' whip ourselves. I'd had enough. I'd hated myself enough. I wanted a change and that change came with years of learning how to stop hating myself. When I stopped hating me, I stopped hating the world. It just works like that."

The songs have the same sparseness, the same intimacy, but there is something else. A quiet confidence. Songs with meaning, that urge you to your highest good, or just let you know you're a part of something bigger than yourself. Sounds that make you want to take action. Even if it's just to be kinder to yourself. And that's a lot.

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